

# KAUAI ‘Ō‘Ō

(*Moho braccatus*)

Known to the Hawaiians as ‘Ō‘o-‘a‘a, these birds were prized for their striking yellow feathers. The birds were ensnared with a rod, and the yellow feathers removed to adorn the capes and crested feather helmets of the ali‘i, or chiefs.

**DISTRIBUTION:** The Kaua‘i ‘Ō‘ō was found in the wet ‘ohi‘a forests in a remote area of the Alaka‘i Swamp.

**DESCRIPTION:** The ‘Ō‘ō is 8 inches long and has a black head, back, wings, and tail. The abdomen and undertail coverts are brown. Black throat feathers are streaked with bars of white. The legs are black with yellow thigh feathers.

**VOICE:** Calls are variable, loud, mellow whistles, “ah-o” and “whip-poor-wee-o.” The alarm call is “keet-keet” The song, composed of flute-like notes, is variable and complex.

**NESTING:** A nest was first discovered in the Alaka‘i Swamp in 1971. It was found in a cavity of a dead ‘ohi‘a tree about 40 feet above the ground. The cavity opened toward the west, allowing protection from predominant northeast trade-winds. Two downy, gray nestlings, less than one-half inch in length, were continually fed by both parents.

**DIET:** ‘Ō‘ō forage for spiders, moths, beetles, insect larvae, and small snails in moss-covered tree trunks. Lobelia and ‘olapa fruits and the nectar of ‘ohi‘a also make up part of the diet

**CONSERVATION NOTE:** Three different species of ‘Ō‘ō are now extinct. Gone are distinct species from O‘ahu, Moloka‘i, and Hawai‘i. Today the rare and beautiful Kaua‘i ‘Ō‘ō may represent the last of its kind. Once common before the turn of the century, the Kaua‘i ‘Ō‘ō is now on the verge of extinction. During intensive surveys conducted on Kaua‘i in 1981 only two ‘Ō‘ō were found, and recent searches have failed to reveal more encouraging results.

In the 1890s Kaua‘i ‘Ō‘ō were common in forests from near sea level to high upland ridges. Fossils found in former dry lowland forests testify to their occupation of a much wider range. The clearing of land for agricultural and other uses undoubtedly hastened their decline. Shortly after 1900 the population of ‘Ō‘ō had already begun to diminish drastically. And seventy years later only 40 ‘Ō‘ō were believed to inhabit the remote reaches of the Alaka‘i Swamp.

Exact reasons for their most recent decline remain a mystery, but avian diseases may have dealt the final blow. The ‘Ō‘ō is the sole surviving Hawaiian species of the South Pacific bird family, the Honeyeaters (*Meliphagidae*). Its enchanting song might serve as a plaintive reminder of the need for preservation and management of what remains of Hawai‘i’s native forests.



The melodious songs of the last Kaua‘i ‘Ō‘ō haunt the Alaka‘i, Kaua‘i.  
— Painting by Sheryl Ives Boynton